

## **The Origin and Derivation of the words "Garo" "A'Chik", "Garo Hills" and "A'Chik A'Song," "Mandai" and "Mande"**

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The words "Garo" and "Garo Hills" are more commonly used both officially and unofficially than the words "A'chik" and "A'chik A'song". In fact, the people and their districts are known only as Garos and Garo Hills. The words "A'chik" and "A'chik A'song" do not figure at all. It is only within the Garos themselves that they automatically use the terms while talking among themselves. However, how all these terminologies have been originated and derived have been a matter of great controversy and the present paper makes an earnest attempt to bring to light many theories regarding the origin and derivations of these terminologies.

The origin and derivation of the word "garo" is still shrouded in mystery. As such, there have been many theories and conjectures by various writers on this point. However, on my earnest and careful investigation, it became crystal clear that there is no word as "Garo" in the Garo language. The people themselves never use the word among themselves, neither do the word has any meaning in their language nor there is any root Garo word from which this word could be originated or derived. As such, it is a foreign word for them. The people make mention of this word to refer to themselves only while in conversation with the non-Garos. Otherwise, they automatically refer themselves as "A'chik" or "A'chik Manderang". A'chik means Hill and Mande means Man or Hill man. Besides, on my further enquiry, I have discovered that no Garo likes to be called by the name Garo. It is not acceptable to them.

Regarding the origin and derivation of the word "Garo", there are various views and opinions which are mentioned below :-

One theory which has its foundation on the story of migration from Tibet was that there was a Garo Chief named "Garu" or "Garu Mandei". He eventually gave his own name to the tribe and to the place while they were still in Tibet and thenceforth they were known as the "Garu" or "Garu Mandeirang" and later on "Garo-Manderang", and the land came to be known as "Garu A'song" or "Garo A'song" or Garo land.<sup>1</sup>

According to Late Jobang D. Marak, there were various hill tribes living in the middle parts of Tibet. There was also a place known as "Garu Pradesh." It is believed that the Garos have migrated from that place. There are also the names of places in the province of Tibet like Taleng, Keing, Saling, Maling, Samling, Songnam, Inam, Kuring, Sideng, Sara, Koje, Kuo and Kurik.<sup>2</sup> These names resemble very much the names of the present day villages of Garo Hills. It is believed that the Garo ancestors started off from the Garu Pradesh or the land of Tibet and hence the people came to be known as "Garu" or the "Garos".<sup>3</sup>

Major A. Playfair mentioned that there exists a division of the Garo tribe who call themselves, "Gara-Ganching". These people are found on the southern part of the Garo Hills district not far removed from Mymensingh district of present day Bangladesh from which direction the Garos were first approached by the Europeans and the neighbouring plains people. From the name of the division of the Garo tribe, the name has been extended to all the inhabitants of the entire Garo Hills, and it was from the word "Gara", it has been corrupted into "Garo".<sup>4</sup>

Another theory was that the Garos once settled in the plains of Bengal, now in Malda district. At that time, they were under one Garo chief named Sanka who founded the kingdom of Gaur, and they were then called as the Gaur people. From Gaur, they came to be called as the Garos in course of centuries<sup>5</sup>. Shri P. K. Dhar Choudhury told me at Tura on 22.3.1983 that there were some groups of people bearing the title of "Gaur" and belonging to the plains tribal, who settled in the Malda district since time immemorial. He further stated that they were originally from the hills of Koch Behar. Thus he surmised that the Gaur people might be the

branch of the Garos who once settled in Koch Behar in course of their migration from Tibet.

### A'chik and A'chik A'song

As stated earlier, the Garos prefer to call themselves as A'chik or A'chik Manderang, and as such, the appropriate term for their land will be "A'chik A'song" or A'chik Land. There are traditional songs and legends which explain the origin and meaning of the word "A'chik". If this word "A'chik" is broken into two, it gives two different meanings ;

- (i) A'a means earth, and Chik or Chika means bite.
- (ii) A'a means earth, and Chik or Bo'chik means high undulating land.

The Garo system of trial of cases begins with oath-taking. The complainant and the accused both swear by taking a lump of soil in their hands in front of the gathering with a promise that they will state the truth and nothing but the truth. It is believed by some Garos that this is the origin of the word "A'chik". Others believe that they have been called the A'chiks as they inhabited the high undulating land.

In connection with the system of swearing in by holding a lump of soil, there is a very popular and definite Garo legend. According to this legend, the Garos once settled at a hill called "Matcha Melaram A'bri" or "Matcha Maruni A'song" which is today known as the Bagh Mela Pahar, situated near the Kinangaon village, about eight kilometres away from Boko in the Kamrup district of Assam. This hill was however the abode of the ferocious species who were half tiger and half man. So the Garos started off again, moving westwards and occupied a new place called as "Matia Panchia Sangkati Wakmetom", where they opened a market. This was a vast plain area between Boko and Singra villages in the present day Kamrup district of Assam. While they were there, they once assembled at a big gathering at the market place on a vast patio of one Garo Chief named Rangbildi Rangbilda or Bonepa Janepa, father of Bone Jane. In the gathering, one man named Rajidpa, father of Rajid, who was regarded as the wisest and the most far-sighted man, expressed in clear terms the need for settling for ever over certain

basic issues involving the whole tribe. Thus he broached the following issues before them for their settlement :-

1. To occupy certain lands as their permanent lands of A'king lands.
2. To promote cooperation and establish good understanding among different chatchis and ma'chongs (different clusters or clans).
3. To regulate the marriage system of their society among different clusters or clans.
4. To make a final decision on the Nokkrom system or the system of Inheritance.

It was said that every member of the gathering participated in the proceedings of this great assembly. And after having come to a decision on those issues, every one of them took an oath by biting the lump of soil and thereby signifying that they will always abide by those decisions. They also swore by biting a lump of earth saying that they will never leave the place occupied by them which is now known as the "Garó Hills" and fight till the last breath of their lives to defend their lands against the encroachers and invaders. It was on account of their oath by biting a lump of earth that they called themselves as "A'ako chike mikchetgiparang" or "A'chirang" or the people who took oath by biting a lump of soil with their teeth. Their land was also known as "A'chik A'song" or A'chik land at that time.

### **Mandei or Mande**

Various views have also been expressed with regard to the origin and derivation of the words, "Mand-i" or "Mande". With regard to the name "Mandei" or "Mande", which only means "man" or "the man", it is suggested that the name is a contraction for "Mannide" or "son of Man" (Man being the name given to the Burmese)<sup>7</sup>.

Another view was that a group of Garos migrated from Eastern Tibet under the great leadership of Raja Sirampa towards Burma and settled down on the bank of the Irrawady river at a place called Mandalaya for many years. At that time, the Garos were known as the inhabitants of Mandalay by the

aboriginal people of Burma and since then they have been known as "Mandalayas" or "Manday" or "Mande"<sup>8</sup>.

There is another legend which says that one of the ancestors of the Garos was named "Noro-Mande". In course of their singing of folk songs or narration of folktales, they frequently refer to themselves as "Noro-Mande Dema Resi". But then, the first and the last words have been dropped and used only the word "Mande" in course of time. As such, they came to be called as the Mande or Mandei.

Thus from the above, it has been found that since there was no definite information of any historical value on the origin and derivation of the words, no conclusion can be arrived at on those points. Different scholars and writers can only make guesses and advance them in support of their own contentions.

However, there are several points in the old-age Garo customs, culture, beliefs and songs which show the originality of the name of the people and the land they claim to be their own. One such song is mentioned below with the literal English translation :-

Angni A'chik songna	- My A'chik land
Archiram songtangna	- The land of my birth
Anga ka'saa	- I love.
Ka'sa nang bolgrimna	- I love your forest
A'bri chiringrangna	- Hills and streams
Ka'a moa nang'na	- My heart throbs for you
A'chik songna	- A'chik land

Though it is difficult to base our conclusions on the legends but such folksongs with such intensity of inner feelings which have been handed down from generations to generations, can be taken as a pointer to the possibility of giving the correct name of the people and their land. Thus my opinion is that the name of the people and the land should be again called "A'chik" and "A'chik A'song" respectively in place of "Garo" and "Garo Hills."

## References

1. A. Playfair., *The Garos*, p. 7.
2. Jobang D. Marak., *Garo History*, Part I, p. 1.
3. Ibid.
4. A. Playfair., p. 7.
5. E. T. Dalton, *Tribal History of Eastern India*, p. 58.
6. D. S. Rongmuthu, *Apasong Agana*, pp. 235-236.
7. A. Playfair., p. 7.
8. D. S. Rongmuthu, p. 235.
9. A. Playfair., p. 7.